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ABSTRACT

The National Consortium on Inclusive Schooling Practices (1996) developed a framework to analyze state and local policies and their effects on school inclusion. The framework focuses on standards-based systemic reform across six major policy areas: curriculum, student assessment, accountability, personnel development and professional training, finance, and governance. This brief discusses student assessment and the need to encourage the involvement of all students, including students with disabilities, in statewide assessments. The following topics are addressed: (1) why students are assessed; (2) the relationship between standards and assessment; (3) what we know about reforms in assessment; (4) questions to consider in statewide assessment systems; (5) students with disabilities and state assessment in Kentucky; (6) provisions in the new Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that require students with disabilities to be included in state assessments; (7) alternative portfolios; (8) the content of alternative portfolios; (9) how alternative assessment are scored; and (10) how state assessments are linked to accountability. The brief concludes that with the advent of standards-based reform, states have increased the importance placed on student testing and accountability, and that the Kentucky model holds great promise for including students with disabilities in statewide assessments. (CR)

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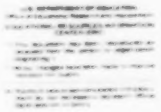
Statewide Assessment Systems: Who's In and Who's Out?

Douglas Fisher, Virginia Roach, and Jacqui Kearns



Introduction

In 1996, the National Consortium on Inclusive Schooling Practices developed a framework to analyze state and local policies and their effects on school inclusion (Consortium on Inclusive Schooling Practices, 1996). This framework corresponds with the prevailing reform model being used in most states by focusing on standards-based systemic reform across six major policy areas: curriculum, student assessment, accountability, personnel development and professional training, finance, and governance. The present brief focuses on student assessment. The guiding principle of this issue brief is that assessment systems, especially those used for accountability, should encourage the involvement of all students, including students with disabilities.

Why Assess Students?

As the public continues to demand increased accountability from its schools and as school administrators and policymakers increase their use of performance and outcome data for decision making, people are paying more attention to who gets tested, what kinds of tests are used, and what the results mean. First, it is important to understand that students can be assessed for a wide variety of purposes (Joint Commission on Testing Practices, et. al., 1995):

- Diagnosing individual students (e.g., assessing developmental status, monitoring and communicating student progress, certifying competency);
- Improving instruction (e.g., evaluating instruction, modifying instructional strategies, identifying instructional needs);
- Evaluating programs, and;
- Providing accountability information.

It is also important to understand that there are multiple kinds of tests, even within one state or district assessment system. For example, state assessments vary on the following characteristics: the subject areas and grade levels tested, the item formats

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used, and the type of skills tested (basic versus higher-order thinking skills). Depending on the purpose of the tests, results can be reported at several different levels: by student, classroom, grade, school, district, state, or national. Although it is important to keep in mind the different purposes and levels of assessment in education, this issue brief will focus primarily on state-level systems and the inclusion of students with disabilities within these systems.

The Relationship Between Standards and Assessment

Proponents of standards-based systemic reform maintain that if high, rigorous standards are created for all students and are clearly communicated to educators, students, family members, business leaders, policymakers and the community at large, then a coordinated effort can be mounted which focuses on increased achievement (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1996). The intended result is that all students, rich and poor, those with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities will achieve academically. In other words, the expectations for all students are increased, and the entire system is focused on helping students achieve those higher expectations.

Student assessment, then, becomes the process by which student progress toward attaining these standards is measured. However, many of the current assessment systems are not aligned with district or state standards. In addition, in some states, the only tests used are norm-referenced, multiple-choice tests[1] that cannot be taken by students with limited English proficiency or those who have disabilities, either because of the tests' form or content. As a result, many students, including those who have limited English proficiency or who have disabilities, are excluded from state testing. The result is assessment data that are not reflective of the total student population and

Types of Assessments

Norm-Referenced Assessment: Norm-referenced assessments (NRAs) compare individual performance against the performance of a representative national sample. Scores from NRAs are usually reported according to "percentiles," with the average student always scoring at the 50th percentile. These assessments are generally designed to broadly represent curricula across the country rather than precisely reflect a single school's, district's or state's course of study.

Criterion-referenced Assessment: Criterion-referenced assessments (CRAs) compare student performance to clearly defined curricular objectives, standards or skill levels. Assessment results are usually reported as a pre-defined level of performance (i.e., demonstrating *proficiency* of addition or *essential knowledge* of photosynthesis) or a numerical score. Criterion-referenced assessments are keyed to specific learning objectives, rather than how students compare with their peers.

Performance Assessment: Performance assessment requires students to formulate an original response to a question and to communicate that response through the performance of some act. For example, a performance assessment may ask a student to produce a written essay, a model or diagram, an experiment result, or a persuasive speech. Performance assessments are usually criterion-referenced.

From: *Issues and Trends in Statewide Assessment Systems*, National Association of State Boards of Education, 1997.

may or may not provide useful information about the attainment of standards for all students.

What We Know About Reforms in Assessment

In many states, recent assessment reform has focused on developing statewide tests that are aligned with new state content and performance standards.[2] Considerable variation exists in how states are developing these new statewide assessments, the status of the process, and the consequences of the results. However, the following trends are notable in assessment reform (Center for Policy Research in General and Special Education Reform, 1997):

- In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many statewide assessments shifted from norm- or criterion-referenced standardized tests of basic skills to performance-based tests that measure higher-order thinking skills and are aligned with the new curriculum standards.

- More recently, states have sought a balance between performance-based assessment items and items that test basic skills.

- Roughly one-third of the states have already established or are moving toward establishing a graduation exam and/or diploma endorsements based on assessments in different subject areas in order to demonstrate that students have met state standards (Council for Chief State School Officers, 1996).

- Some states are experimenting with portfolio assessment, primarily in writing, but are relying mostly on districts to develop and implement such assessments for instructional purposes.

- In those states that have implemented performance-based assessment, both state and district-level staff have reported that teachers have benefitted from the professional development aspects of developing and scoring performance-based items. In particular, educators have noted that having teachers score writing assessments has improved instruction and student writing skills.

Questions to Consider in Statewide Assessment Systems

As on other policy dimensions, a great deal of variation exists among states regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in state assessment systems. In an effort to allow people from different states to communicate about and evaluate their systems, a number of key questions should be addressed, including (National Center for Educational Outcomes, 1994):

- Does the state have written guidelines and exemplars for the participation of students with disabilities in state assessments that are used for accountability purposes?

- Does the state have written guidelines and exemplars for the use of accommodations by students with disabilities in the state assessment system?

- Does the state allow certain groups of students to be excluded from the state assessment system?

- Does the state have written guidelines and exemplars for reporting assessment results for students with disabilities in state assessments?

Students with Disabilities and State Assessment in Kentucky

In Kentucky, all students participate in a

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Now Requires Students with Disabilities to be Included in State Assessments

Aligning itself with Goals 2000 and the School to Work Opportunities Act, IDEA 97 now requires that students with disabilities be included in State and district-wide assessment programs, with individual modifications or adaptations made, as necessary, in how the tests are administered.... Modifications might include giving students more time to take the test in a quiet place, or having someone write down their responses.... It should be noted, however, that whether a particular accommodation is appropriate will depend on the needs of the student and the test itself.

The requirement to include children with disabilities in State and district-wide assessment programs was effective as of June 4,1997 (the date the law was enacted). (For children who cannot participate in regular assessments, States must develop alternate assessments and, beginning no later than July 1, 2000, conduct these alternate assessments.)

Source: *The Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1997: Curriculum.* (November, 1997) Module 6, pp. 6-14. Washington, DC: Office of Special Education Programs. U. S. Department of Education.

series of both performance-based and traditional standardized assessments. Students with disabilities participate in the assessment process in one of three ways. First, a student may participate as any other student and (a) develop writing and mathematics portfolios, (b) submit randomly selected "performance events" with no accommodations, and (c) participate in traditional standardized assessments. The second way students with disabilities may participate in assessment activities is through the use of specially designed accommodations that are both specified on a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and are used routinely during the instruction for that student. The third way a student may participate in the assessment system is through an alternative portfolio assessment designed to accommodate students with disabilities for whom writing and mathematics portfolios, performance events, and traditional assessments would be inappropriate. While there are no policies that specify which category of student will take which assessments, students with moderate and severe cognitive disabilities, about one percent of the total student population, generally participate in the alternative assessment. Given that many states provide options number one and two, we will highlight the uniqueness of the third option in Kentucky.

What is an Alternate Portfolio?

Kentucky has set a national precedent with the alternate portfolio by including all students with disabilities in the statewide assessment and accountability system. For Kentucky, it has exemplified the underlying assumptions of reform "that all students can learn at high levels" and that schools should be held accountable for all students. An important question in the development of Kentucky's assessment system focused on how to meaningfully include students for whom writing and mathematics portfolios (even with accommodations) may not reasonably reflect their individual learning goals.

What is Included in an Alternate Portfolio?

A student's alternate portfolio includes a table of contents, a letter to the reviewer from the student (perhaps written with the help of a teacher or peers in the class), a letter from the parent, and seven to ten academic entries.

Letter from student's parent to review team:

I was very impressed by the friendship between James and the children in the regular primary class. The photographs show clearly that James is extremely happy with being involved in their activities. Obviously, he is an active member in these classes.

I think James is much more patient at home since his inclusion in regular primary classes. Now, he is more tolerant when people that aren't familiar to him visit. He also tolerates several people being there at once, rather than just one or two people.

Overall, I'm quite pleased with James' portfolio as well as his progress.

These entries include the student's school schedule (written with photographs or pictures so that the student can understand it), examples of how the student communicates with others, a resume if the student is in secondary school, and examples of academic work modified for the student.

Letter from peer to review team:

Dear Reviewer,

James put his portfolio together by looking at pictures and notes from his friends. We would take the number stamps and I would help him stamp the pages he wanted and things he didn't like he wouldn't put in it. It was fun to show him all the diffrint stuff. He would reach and touch the page he liked. I helped put the pages in his portfolio. I am James friend we go places together, we eat together, go to recess together. I put him on the bus. I guss that's why he picked me to help him he must like me a lot.

from, Tyler (fourth grade)

The entries are of the student's best work and provide examples of the application of learning. Some examples from recent portfolios in Kentucky include:

- a picture of a student using money to make purchases in the student store
- a picture communication book that the student uses to indicate her choices
- a story written on a computer by the student with an IEP and his cooperative learning group
- examples of the student using switches to make selections during a class lecture
- a checklist that the student uses to complete a homework assignment.

The alternative portfolio also is designed to include parents as active participants in their child's education. As a formal part of the portfolio, parents are asked to review their child's portfolio and write a letter commenting on the student's work. In this letter, the parent is asked to address the authenticity and representativeness of the portfolio.

How are Alternative Assessments Scored?

Alternative portfolios are scored during 4th, 8th, and 12th grades, on the same schedule as writing portfolios. Alternate portfolio scoring takes place at the regional level, that is, scorers from multiple districts bring their portfolios to a central location in the region. Training in scoring portfolios is required for each teacher who supports a student who will be submitting a portfolio. This training is provided by the Kentucky Alternate Portfolio Assessment Project, under contract with the State Department of Education. Each portfolio is scored by two teachers who do not know the student. If the two independent scorers agree, that score is assigned to the portfolio. If the two independent scorers disagree, the portfolio will be scored a third time by a state-level scorer who assigns the official score. There are four levels of performance in the alternative portfolio: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished.

The standards for scoring the alternative portfolio include the elements that make up a "world class" education. For example, the portfolio could illustrate how basic skills are incorporated into meaningful activities. The basic skills come from the IEP, while the activities — the way in which those skills are applied — come from the general education curriculum. For example, a student's IEP may identify that she needs to learn the basic skill of reach, grasp, and release. She can practice this skill during the regular class geography lesson where students are making globes from paper maché and during the math activities where unifix cubes are being used as manipulatives for students to grasp mathematical concepts.

How are State Assessments Linked to Accountability?

A student's score from an alternative portfolio is combined with the scores from all of the other students in a school and are used to determine an "accountability index."[3] This index is used by the state to identify schools that may need technical assistance in order to improve student achievement. In addition, some schools receive rewards for their improvement in student outcomes based on their accountability index. While it is obvious that one student's score will not have a huge impact on the overall accountability index, an alternative portfolio scored at the proficient or distinguished level can have an impact, particularly if the school is close to the margin for receiving an award or sanction. Similarly, an incomplete alternate portfolio that scores at the novice level could conceivably cause a school to lose a fraction of a point from their accountability index.

Conclusions

With the advent of standards-based reform, states have increased the importance placed on student testing and accountability. Now, more than ever, it is important that all students be assessed and that their assessments are counted in building, district, and state accountability mechanisms. Among reforming states, Kentucky is unique in its "zero reject" policy toward student assessment. It is the obligation of the supporters of students with disabilities to learn about their own state's assessment system and to help state policymakers to learn more about Kentucky's alternative portfolio assessment policy and program. The Kentucky model appears to hold great promise in determining that all students are "in" not "out" of the assessment picture.

ENDNOTES

[1]During development, these tests are given to sample groups of students with strict guidelines for administration. Scores for the "sample" are calculated and then future groups are compared with the standardized administration.

[2]Content standards are usually defined as what students should know; performance standards are defined as what students should be able to do.

[3]The Kentucky Accountability Index is used to determine the school's "accountability index." The index is a combination of assessment scores that are used to compare a school with its own past performance. Accountability indices are used to determine if a school has reached its goals, resulting in cash awards or sanctions.

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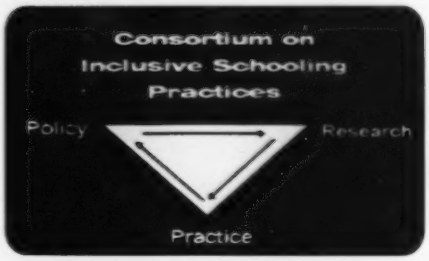

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